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INTRODUCTION

In early 2003, right around the start of the war in Iraq, I was visiting an old Shia friend in Pakistan. We talked about the changes that were beginning to sweep the Middle East. For my friend there was a twist of irony to all the talk of Shias and Sunnis that was beginning to fill the airwaves, clearly confusing those in the West who thought that all that mattered in Iraq and the Middle East was the fight for democracy. It made him think of an exchange he had had with a high-ranking U.S. official.

My friend had been a senior Pakistani government official in the 1980s, the liaison with the Pentagon in managing the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. He reminisced that back in those days, when Iran and Hezbollah were waging an active terror war against the United States and the Afghan mujahideen were the "good guys," his American counterpart, a senior official at the Pentagon, often teased him by saying that Shias were "bloodthirsty, baby-eating monsters."

My friend would retort that Americans had got it wrong. "Just wait and see," he would tell his colleague from the States. "The real problem will be the Sunnis. They are the bullies; the Shias are the underdogs." Time passed, and my friend retired from government service. One sleepy afternoon in the fall of 2001, after September 11, his slumber was disturbed by the noise of sirens as a caravan of black SUVs descended on his house in Islamabad. His old American friend, now an important man in Washington, had come back to Pakistan to manage another war in Afghanistan, and he had decided to drop by. The American asked my friend, "Do you remember our discussions all those years ago about Shias and Sunnis? I want you to explain to me what you meant when you said that the Sunnis would be the real problem." So my friend explained the difference between the two sects of Islam, and who had dominated whom and when and why, and what all that would mean today.

What my friend told his American visitor took on greater importance as the Iraq war added a layer of complexity to the already difficult problems facing the United States after 9/11. There were now also the implications of the Shia-Sunni conflict to consider as American leaders looked for ways to contain the threat of Islamic extremism, grapple with the challenges of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and bring reform to the Middle East.

I was on a research trip in Pakistan in April 2003 when two million Shias gathered in the Iraqi city of Karbala to mark the Arbaeen, the commemoration of the fortieth day after the martyrdom of the Shia saint Imam Husayn at Karbala in 680 C.E. Saddam Hussein had banned such gatherings for years. The last thing he wanted was that many Shias together in one place, in a state of high religious excitement, venerating a hero of their faith who was a close relative of the Prophet Muhammad himself and who—so the Shia believe—had died resisting tyranny to the last.

On that particular "fortieth day," so soon after the one on which U.S. Marines and jubilant Iraqis had pulled down Saddam's hollow image in Baghdad's Firdous Square, I happened to be on the outskirts of Lahore, visiting the headquarters of a Sunni fundamentalist political group known as the Jamaat-e Islami (Islamic Party). The office television set was tuned to CNN, as everyone was following news from Iraq. The coverage turned to scenes of young Shia men standing densely packed in the shadow of the golden dome of Imam Husayn's shrine at Karbala. They all wore black shirts and had scarves of green (the universal color of Islam) wrapped around their heads. They chanted a threnody in Arabic for their beloved saint as they raised their empty hands as if in prayer toward heaven and in unison brought them down to thump on their chests in a rhythmic gesture of mourning, solidarity, and mortification. The image was magnetic, at once jubilant and defiant. The Shia were in the streets, and they were holding their faith and their identity high for all to see. We stared at the television screen. My Sunni hosts were aghast at what they were seeing. A pall descended on the room.

Iraq had not seen such scenes in a generation or more, and now the world was bearing witness to the Shia awakening. The CNN commentator was gleefully boasting that Iraqis were free at last—they were performing a ritual that the audience in the West did not understand but that had been forbidden to the Shia for decades. What Americans saw as Iraqi freedom, my hosts saw as the blatant display of heretical rites that are anathema to orthodox Sunnis. Iraqis were free—free to be Shias, free to challenge Sunni power and the Sunni conception of what it means to be a true Muslim; free to reclaim their millennium-old faith. "These actions are not right," said one of my hosts. Iraqis—by which he meant the Shia—"do not know the proper practice of Islam." The Shia-Sunni debates over the truth of the Islamic message and how to practice it would con-

tinue, he added, not just peacefully and symbolically but with bombs and bullets. He was talking not about Iraq but about Pakistan.

My hosts at the Jamaat said forlornly that the situation in Iraq would open sectarian wounds in Pakistan and that the struggles certain to ensue in Iraq would be played out in the mosques and on the streets of Karachi and Lahore, too. Later that year bomb blasts during the Shia festival of Ashoura (the main commemoration of Husayn's martyrdom) killed scores, in Baghdad and Najaf and in Quetta, Pakistan. A common thread had already begun to weave together sectarian conflict in the two countries. That thread has long run through the fabric of social and political life across the broader Middle East—at times invisible within a regional politics that can be more intricate and colorful than the pattern on an Isfahan carpet, but at other times as obvious as the stripe running down the middle of a highway.

The Shia-Sunni conflict is at once a struggle for the soul of Islam—a great war of competing theologies and conceptions of sacred history—and a manifestation of the kind of tribal wars of ethnicities and identities, so seemingly archaic at times, yet so surprisingly vital, with which humanity has become wearily familiar. Faith and identity converge in this conflict, and their combined power goes a long way toward explaining why, despite the periods of coexistence, the struggle has lasted so long and retains such urgency and significance. It is not just a hoary religious dispute, a fossilized set piece from the early years of Islam's unfolding, but a contemporary clash of identities. Theological and historical disagreements fuel it, but so do today's concerns with power, subjugation, freedom, and equality, not to mention regional conflicts and foreign intrigues. It is, paradoxically, a very old, very modern conflict.

For the quarter century between the Iranian revolution in 1979

and September 11, 2001, the United States saw the Middle East far too often through the eyes of the authoritarian Sunni elites in Islamabad, Amman, Cairo, and Riyadh, who were America's major local allies. Even in Western scholarly tomes on Islam, the Shia received only cursory treatment. As the Middle East changes and the Sunni ascendancy continues to come under challenge, the U.S. perspective on the region must change as well. Responding to European objections to the war in Iraq, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously distinguished the "old Europe," which opposed the war, from the "new Europe," which was more likely to support it. The war has also drawn a line (albeit in a different way) between an "old" and a "new" Middle East. The old Middle East lived under the domination of its Arab component and looked to Cairo, Baghdad, and Damascus—those ancient seats of Sunni caliphs—as its "power towns." The region's problems, ambitions, identity, and self-image were primarily, if not exclusively, those of the Arabs. The dominant political values of the old Middle East are a decades-old vintage of Arab nationalism.

This Middle East, now passing uneasily away, was at its core a place by, for, and about the Sunni ruling establishment. The new Middle East coming fitfully into being—its birth pangs punctuated by car bombs but also by peaceful protests and elections—is defined in equal part by the identity of Shias, whose cultural ties and relations of faith, political alliances, and commercial links cut across the divide between Arab and non-Arab. Consider that Iraq, together with Egypt and Syria one of the three most important Arab countries and a serious contender for Arab-world leadership during the Arab nationalist heyday, elected a Kurd as its first postwar president and has been cultivating far closer relations with Iran than with its Arab neighbors. Iraq's Shia and Kurdish majority even chose to omit the customary pledge of allegiance to Arab identity in the country's

first attempt at a new constitution in the summer of 2005, declaring Iraq to be not an "Arab republic" but a "federal republic" instead.

The elected officials of Iraq's fledgling postwar government are the first Shia leaders that the United States has had any direct and meaningful contact with since the Iranian revolution. When American leaders spoke of changing the region's politics for the better after the Iraq war, they were in effect talking about democratizing the old Sunni-dominated Middle East. They gave little thought to the new Middle East that is emerging, and have yet to grasp its potential. This Middle East will not be defined by the Arab identity or by any particular form of national government. Ultimately, the character of the region will be decided in the crucible of Shia revival and the Sunni response to it.

The Middle East today is more vulnerable to instability and extremism than at any time since Iran's Islamic revolution swept a U.S. ally off the throne of that country and brought Shia radicals to power there. America's call for democracy in the region has rattled its friends while failing to placate its enemies. The conflict in Iraq has brought to power a Shia religious coalition and created an Islamic-cum-nationalist insurgency that is strengthening jihadi extremism.

Thus the Shia-Sunni conflict has captured world attention, but to Arabs and Iranians, Afghans and Pakistanis living in the region, it is an age-old scourge that has flared up from time to time to mold Islamic history, theology, law, and politics. It has been far more important in shaping the Middle East than many realize or acknowledge. And it has become deeply embedded in popular prejudice, as stereotypes of the plebeian Shias and their wrongheaded view of Islam have defined how many Sunnis have seen their kinsmen. In Lebanon, popular lore has held that Shias have tails; they reproduce too prolifically, are too loud in expressing their religiosity, and, given

Lebanon's debonair self-image, are ridiculed for their low-class, tasteless and vulgar ways.[1] Despite the political popularity of Hezbollah, Shias face discrimination and are dismissed as provincial, uncouth, and unfit for their lofty pretension of representing Lebanon. In Saudi Arabia, it is said that Shias spit in their food—a slander no doubt meant to discourage even socialization over meals between Sunnis and Shias—and that shaking hands with a Shia is polluting, necessitating ablutions.[2] In Pakistan, Shias are tagged with derogatory nicknames such as "mosquitoes."

The West, too, has had its wars of religion: the Thirty Years' War, the conflict in Northern Ireland, and the quieter but real prejudices and forms of discrimination that Westerners have applied against one another over religious differences. These conflicts and rivalries have not always been over matters of theological principle but more often have reflected competing claims to power made by rival communities with roots in differing religious identities. Religion is not just about God and salvation; it decides the boundaries of communities. Different readings of history, theology, and religious law perform the same role as language or race in defining what makes each identity unique and in saying who belongs to it and who does not.

We live in an age of globalization, but also one of identity politics. It is as if our world is expanding and contracting at the same time. Diverse peoples embrace universal values, and once insular communities engage in unprecedented levels of commerce and communication with the outside world. Yet at the same time the primordial or near-primordial ties of race, language, ethnicity, and religion make their presence felt with dogged determination. This is the reality of our time, and the Muslim world cannot escape it. Its conflicts of identity ebb and flow alongside those struggles that more often draw the world's gaze—between fundamentalism and

modernism, or authoritarianism and democracy—as shapers of Muslims' futures.

As war, democracy, and globalization force the Middle East to open itself up to a number of long-resisted forms of change—conflicts such as the Shia-Sunni rift will become both more frequent and more intense. Before the Middle East can arrive at democracy and prosperity, it will have to settle these conflicts—those between ethnic groups such as Kurds, Turks, Arabs, and Persians, and, more importantly, the broader one between Shias and Sunnis. Just as the settlement of religious conflicts marked Europe's passage to modernity, so the Middle East will have to achieve sectarian peace before it can begin living up to its potential.

In the coming years Shias and Sunnis will compete over power, first in Iraq but ultimately across the entire region. Beyond Iraq, other countries will (even as they embrace reform) have to cope with intensifying rivalries between Shias and Sunnis. The overall Sunni-Shia conflict will play a large role in defining the Middle East as a whole and shaping its relations with the outside world. Sectarian conflict will make Sunni extremists more extreme and will likely rekindle revolutionary zeal among the Shia. At times the conflict will be bloody, as it strengthens the extremists, swelling their ranks, popularizing their causes, and amplifying their voices in politics, thus complicating the broader effort to contain Islamic radicalism. Even those who will attempt to douse the flames of sectarian conflict will not always do so in the name of moderation. They will, rather, seek to build a common front between Shias and Sunnis in a larger struggle against the United States and Israel.

Shias and Sunnis are not monolithic communities, and this book does not begin from that premise. The followers of each sect are divided by language, ethnicity, geography, and class. There are also disagreements within each group over politics, theology, and religious law, not to mention the divide between the pious and the less

vigilant or even the outright secular. The Shia world and the Sunni world overlap and intermingle geographically. They also spread across a variety of cultural zones and myriad smaller ethnic communities. There are Arab, Persian, and South Asian cultural zones, to name a few, and then within these zones there are further linguistic and ethnic divisions. In Iraq, for instance, there are broad differences between Arab, Kurdish, and Turkoman Shias, as well as between city folk, tribespeople, peasants, and marsh dwellers. Yet no matter how much we may focus on the diversity of opinions, customs, attitudes, and interests within each community, in the end it is not the diversity that defines the conflict but the conflict that defines social attitudes that are widely shared.

Like many populations that have lived uneasily near each other for a long time, Shias and Sunnis have their stories of common struggles, communal harmony, friendship, and intermarriage. There are clerics, such as Ayatollahs Muhammad Asef Mohseni of Afghanistan and Kalb-e Sadeq of India, who preach sectarian peace. In Iraq, major tribes like the al-Jubouri, Shammar, and Tamimi all in varying proportions have both Shia and Sunni members. Across the Middle East Shias and Sunnis have often rallied around the same political causes and even fought together in the same trenches, most notably against foreign occupation, as in Iraq against the British in 1920 and in Lebanon against Israel in the late 1980s. In fact, no cause in modern times has brought the two sides together more than the fight against Israel. But none of this makes the Shia-Sunni conflict imaginary or irrelevant. The social and political attitudes that sustain it have strong roots in religion, history, and the recent experiences of both communities. The Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, Saddam's brutal suppression of the Shia uprising in 1991, the Iranian-Saudi rivalry since 1979, the Saudi-Pakistani-Taliban alliance in the 1990s, and Saudi Arabia's enormous financial investment in the infrastructure of Sunni

extremism in South and Central Asia in the 1990s have all been expressions of the sectarian substructure that runs beneath Middle East politics and continues to affect events, even if it is not always obvious to outside observers.

Many commentators have pointed out that even in Iraq, where Shia-Sunni conflict is most intense, the hostility between the two communities does not run as deep as that between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland or Christians and Muslims in Lebanon. Hatred is less visceral, and Shias blame Saddam, not their Sunni neighbors, for their poverty and suffering. There are more mixed communities, and there has been frequent intermarriage. But the growing intensity of sectarian conflict in Iraq is corroding these bonds.[3] As Rwandans and residents of the Balkans can sadly testify, mixed marriages and a history of communal coexistence are no guarantee against fratricide. Even Sarajevo's cosmopolitan blend of Muslim, Croat, and Serbian communities, with its hybrid culture and mixed families, did not protect it from the violence of Yugoslavia's genocidal wars.

In Iraq, rage against suicide bombings by Sunni extremists (many of whom, it should be noted, are non-Iraqis) has led to vigilante Shia reprisals, including kidnapping, torture, executions, and assassinations, even as senior Shia leaders continue to urge restraint.[4] Moreover, what amounts to ethnic cleansing by both sides is changing the human landscape of the country by force. Al-Daura, an anti-coalition stronghold in southern Baghdad, had been three quarters Sunni and a quarter Shia, but Shias recently began to leave the neighborhood in droves.[5] In Ramadi, a jihadi and ex-Ba'thist hotbed in the restless Sunni province of al-Anbar, the local Sunni population could not stop insurgents from pushing the city's Shia inhabitants to leave.[6] In Basra, the violence has been flowing the other way as Shia extremists murder Sunni clerics, other leaders, and even

ordinary people, sparking a Sunni exodus from the largest city of the Iraqi south.[7]

What makes sectarian conflict particularly relevant to the future of the Middle East is that it is surfacing at a time when anti-Americanism, religious conservatism, and extremism are on the rise. Sunni extremism feeds on anti-Shia bias and even violence. The spasms of sectarian rivalries strengthen Sunni extremism and sanction the violence, which—at least in places where the Shia can fight back—leads to a vicious cycle of provocation and revenge followed by more of the same.

Sectarian politics is also making its mark at a time of intense and wider-than-ever debates about the future of democracy in the region. Those debates are not only about the rights of individuals, the reform of unrepresentative governments, and the rule of law, but also about the relative power of Shias and Sunnis in defining and running governments and controlling state resources. For the United States to bring stability to its relations with the Middle East, it will have to invest in democracy, but that investment can bear fruit only if it broadens and deepens its ties within the region and goes beyond a small clique of authoritarian rulers to engage a broader segment of the region's population. This will have to mean broader and deeper engagement with the Shia, a lesson that was writ large after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Building democracy in that country cannot happen without including Shias in the political process. A fifth of the population but traditionally marginalized by the dominant Sunni Pashtuns, the Shias have most to benefit from democracy. Not only did the fall of the Taliban free them from the yoke of religious tyranny, but changes that followed the war gave them a say in Afghanistan's future, as their existence and rights were for the first time recognized in the country's new constitution.

The Middle East's sectarian pains are not divorced from the larger political and economic and security problems that ail the region. Dictatorships have failed to build inclusive political systems that share power and give a place at the table to all. Economic stagnation and mismanagement have made things worse. The resurgence of the Shia-Sunni conflict feeds on the malaise at the heart of the Middle East's political and economic life, so much of which is marred by a persistent inability or unwillingness to negotiate over power peacefully and through regular channels. When change comes, it is abrupt and violent; what engineers call "graceful," as opposed to "cataclysmic," system transformation is a difficult thing to bring about in the Middle East. History and theology may establish the identities of rival groups; but the actual bones of contention are far less likely to be religious ideas than matters of concrete power and wealth doled out along communal lines.

Peace and stability will come to the Middle East only when the distribution of power and wealth reflects the balance between the communities and the political system includes all and provides for peaceful ways of resolving disputes. Once the conflicts that have already been set in motion are exhausted, the majority of Shias and Sunnis will settle for a political order that they can share—not dominated by one or the other, theologically or politically—and that represents everyone's social, economic, and political aspirations.

This book is not about the war in Iraq but about the conflicts that the war and its aftermath have unleashed and how those conflicts will shape the future. My aim is to explain why there is a Shia-Sunni conflict, why has it become more salient of late, and what it will mean for both the future of the Middle East and the Muslim world's relations with the West. There is much here about Islam and Islamic history and more about what it means to those who follow that faith. It is not possible to write on these issues without also writing

about a topic of great interest to the West in recent decades: Islam's complex and seemingly unbreakable ties to politics.

To Western eyes, Muslim politics is defined by Islamic values. Politics may look for truth in religious texts, but it will always do so from within a context that is not purely religious. People read, understand, and interpret their sources of sacred meaning in relation to the hopes and fears that define their daily lives. It is therefore not always possible to talk of one Islamic reality, and less so of one Shia or one Sunni reality. Piety and politics for Shias and Sunnis alike are shaped by the particularities of life in societies as varied as those of India, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. As different as such contexts are, the Iraq war has changed them all.